

# **Athens, Greece: 2006 Crime and Safety Report**

## **CRIME AND SAFETY**

Europe - Greece

27 Apr 2006

### **Overall Crime and Safety Situation**

Statistics suggest that violent crime in Greece occurs considerably less often than in other European countries. Armed violence and random assaults are still somewhat uncommon. Athens is relatively safer in terms of violent crime than comparably sized metropolitan cities. That said, rates of street crimes like pickpocketings, purse snatchings and other crimes of opportunity appear to remain steady. Attempted and committed armed bank robberies have risen in Greece over the last two years but still remain low in relation to population size. Sexual assault crimes appear to have been on the decline in 2005 after remaining stable for a period of five years, and are also low in relation to population size.

Police have reported a significant increase in both burglaries of unoccupied homes and apartments, as well as theft from attended and unattended vehicles with valuables left in plain sight. "Smash & Grab" thefts are also a reoccurring phenomenon. A common ploy is for a criminal to approach a vehicle from the passenger side, smash the window, and then grab objects from the passenger seat. A variation of this crime is to have the perpetrator open a vehicle's trunk and remove items. This most often occurs while someone is waiting at a traffic light or stop sign. Over the last year, criminals have gone so far as to follow a vehicle into a residential driveway and then attempt to open the doors or trunk to grab anything they can. There is usually someone waiting for them on a motorcycle in order to make a quick getaway. These types of incidents are usually reported around the holiday shopping seasons. In the past, mission employees have reported incidents of pickpocketing while using the Metro (subway) or in crowded shopping areas.

The issue of drugs and drug-related offenses continues to be a public concern. The counternarcotics unit of the Greek Police does not have its own budget and, as a result, police equipment is often outdated and training sporadic. There has been an increase in the number of trafficking organizations operating in Greece. With its long coastline, numerous islands, and long land borders with other countries, Greece is a favored drug

transit route to Western Europe. This past year saw another dismantling of a major smuggling organization, this time culminating in the seizure of 6.5 tons of hashish, 1 ton of ephedrine, and the arrest of several individuals in January. Although Greece has one of the highest annual rates of death from drug overdoses in Europe, there was a slight decline of such cases in 2005.

Organized crime is on the increase in Greece. These operations focus on trafficking in persons as well as drugs. Several assassinations attributed to organized crime have taken place in Athens over the last year.

### **Political Violence**

Protests take place in Athens and Thessaloniki on an almost daily basis. The protests are normally organized by labor unions or student groups and are directed against the Greek Government. Protests directed against the American Government have declined over the last year. Protests in both Athens and Thessaloniki take place around the city centers; traffic in the surrounding area can be delayed heavily as a result. Most protests and demonstrations are peaceful but anarchist groups often attach themselves to any demonstration and clash violently with the police. A common practice of anarchist groups is to march towards the city center from the university areas and smash windows and burn vehicles and/or storefronts on their return to the campuses. It is best to avoid the public university areas during these times. Police are forbidden from entering university campuses; as a result, anarchists use them as a safe base of operations.

Athens is designated a critical threat post for political violence based upon terrorist activities by several indigenous organizations. Since 1975 the total number of casualties in Greece resulting from indigenous terrorism is 29 killed and 178 wounded. Since 1975, the 17 November terrorist group has been responsible for the murders of 5 U.S. Government employees and 14 others (mostly Greeks).

The last assassination of an American in Greece occurred in 1991. This attack, on Air Force Sergeant Ronald Stewart, was carried out using a remotely detonated improvised explosive device outside Sgt. Stewart's residence. An anti-tank rocket was fired at the embassy compound on February 15, 1996 causing property damage only. The last assassination attributed to 17 November was the murder of British Defense Attach Brigadier General Steven Saunders who was ambushed on a busy Athens thoroughfare

on his way to work in June 2000.

As recently as December 2002 the Mayor-elect of Athens, Dora Bakoyianni, was the target of an unsuccessful assassination attempt. A gunman opened fire on her unarmored Saab, narrowly missing her as she was driven from her office in downtown Athens. The gunman reportedly had a history of mental problems. In 1989, Bakoyianni's husband was shot and killed by members of 17 November.

Greece has made significant progress combating domestic terrorism. In June 2002, for the first time, Greek authorities arrested suspected members of 17 November. They also arrested four members of the group ELA. Eleven of the 15 defendants were found guilty; four defendants were acquitted due to lack of evidence. Multiple life sentences for the key 17 November terrorists and stringent terms for the rest were issued several days later.

Police also have been seeking evidence that will allow them to arrest other members of 17 November who are believed to be at large, as well as members of Greece's other domestic terrorist groups, including Revolutionary Nuclei, its predecessor Revolutionary Peoples' Struggle, ELA and 1 May.

Despite their successes over the last few years, 2005 saw some setbacks as well for the Greek Police's fight against terrorism. On December 31, 2004, a Greek Police Officer was brutally murdered while standing guard outside the residence of the British Military Attaché. While no group claimed responsibility for this shooting, it is clearly regarded as an act of terrorism. The Greek Police have made little progress in this investigation. In February, due to health reasons, an imprisoned 17 November member and an ELA member had their sentences suspended. Two separate trials involving other suspected ELA members took place but neither produced any new convictions. November saw the beginning of a lengthy appeals trial for all of the remaining imprisoned 17 November members, which is still ongoing.

Anarchist groups have also been problematic for Greek authorities and local businesses. Major U.S. multinational companies have been victims of bombings, rocket and firebomb attacks by anarchists over the years resulting in extensive property damage. Most recently, a major American bank has become a favored target of anarchists; however, Greek banks have been targeted as well. The most serious attack last year against a U.S.

company occurred on October 9 in northern Greece when a warehouse belonging to a subsidiary of a major chemical company was firebombed. An unknown group of anarchists destroyed a mobile laboratory on the site and attempted to destroy the air conditioning system. An unidentified male called a local newspaper and claimed responsibility for the attack on behalf of the Earth Liberation Front. To date attacks against U.S. business interests appear to have been conducted with the intent of causing physical damage only.

Attacks conducted against the Hellenic police appear to be increasing, and the anarchists' actions appear to be getting bolder. There were several incidents this past year involving undercover police officers being attacked by anarchists, as well as anti-riot police buses being attacked and destroyed. Equipment, weapons, or both are often stolen during these attacks. On October 23, 30 hooded anarchists riding on motorcycles attacked the Acropolis police precinct in downtown Athens with Molotov cocktails.

### **Post-Specific Concerns**

Traffic safety is a concern in Greece. A combination of human error, poor road design, and a general disregard for safe driving practices result in hazardous conditions on Greek roadways for both pedestrians and motorists. The massive level of infrastructure improvement and road construction projects in advance of the Olympics alleviated some of the congestion in the city and greatly improved traffic conditions in general. A new perimeter highway (ring road) has had only a marginal impact on easing traffic problems due to its distance from the city's center.

The rate of serious vehicular accidents is substantially higher in Greece than it is in the U.S. and the rest of Europe. The ability to deliver effective medical treatment following accidents is almost nonexistent. Response time to accident scenes is significantly slower than in the U.S. due to a higher density of vehicular traffic. Motorcycles and scooters normally drive in between lanes and weave in and out of both moving and stopped traffic. Greece leads the European Union in per capita traffic fatalities, primarily due to aggressive driving. Extreme caution should be used when driving in Greece, especially Athens and other major cities.

### **Police and Emergency Response**

Greece has a large national police department totaling approximately 41,000 officers. Improvement in general policing is notable lately and can be attributable to the 2004 Olympic Summer Games. The police are making strides through training opportunities. Greece has initiated a new program with increased foot and vehicle patrols. Due to the Olympic security preparations, there was noticeable improvement in mass casualty incident management, SWAT capability, as well as Coast Guard capability. The police also initiated a new crisis management center, known as the Crisis Police Directorate. Additionally, the police are in the early stages of taking control over the issuance of and security enhancements to Greek passports.

However, police skills, tactical skills, resources and emergency response capabilities still fall short of American law enforcement standards in many respects. Emergency Police and medical responses are hampered by significant traffic congestion and delays. Buses and taxis share emergency traffic lanes; however, Greek motorists largely ignore these restrictions and routinely fail to yield to emergency vehicles.

POLICE EMERGENCY 100

MEDICAL EMERGENCY 166

\*\*\* Note that the emergency operator will transfer the call to the nearest on-call public hospital. This service will not transport patients to any private hospitals that are more preferable.

#### Private Hospitals

Hygeia Hospital 210-682-7940

Mitera Hospital 210-682-0110

EUROCLINIC ATHENS 210-641-6600

#### **For Further Information**

##### THE U.S. EMBASSY IN ATHENS

U.S. Embassy Switchboard: 30-210-721-2951

Fax Number: 30-210-645-6282

Regional Security Office Athens: 30-210-720-2313

U.S. Embassy Athens Website: <http://athens.usembassy.gov/>

There is an active OSAC Country Council in Athens. For more information, including dates and times for meetings, please contact the Regional Security Office or visit <http://athens.osac.gov>.